



How to Stop Wasting Your Life – Carl Jung as Therapist

“This is precisely the risk modern man runs: he may wake up one day to find that he has missed half his life.”

Carl Jung, Practice of Psychotherapy

Psychotropic drugs have become one of the most common forms of treatment for anxiety disorders and depression. But these drugs are not very good at curing people and often they just become crutches for lifelong psychological cripples. Fortunately, there are alternative ways to treat anxiety and depression. In this video we are going to turn to Carl Jung, one of history's greatest psychiatrists, for drug-free advice on how to find a cure to these psychological disorders.

“. . . the elite still cling firmly to the notion that [anxiety] disorders originate in alterations within the brain. Unfortunately many run-of-the-mill doctors still swear by this gospel to the detriment of their patients, whom our age produces in swarms. Nearly all these patients have been convinced by the medical dogma that their sickness is of a physical nature.”

Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life

Jung believed that most cases of anxiety and depression are not the product of a faulty brain, but of a faulty way of life. The first step in Jung's method of treatment, therefore, was not a drug prescription, but a dose of psychological insight – insight regarding what to expect from life and insight into what it takes to change. With respect to the former, Jung noted that many people believe that life should be easy, suffering kept to a minimum and difficulties avoided. But Jung would be blunt with his patients telling them that life is not easy, and comfort and peace are not our natural state. Or as Jung wrote:

“In the last resort it is highly improbable that there could ever be a therapy that got rid of all difficulties. Man needs difficulty; they are necessary for health. What concerns us here is only an excessive amount of them.”

Carl Jung, Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche

Accepting that difficulties are inevitable and nothing worth achieving comes easy, places us on the firm ground of reality from which to change. For when we accept that life is hard, we will also realize that only through a strengthened character do we have any chance of living a good life. If, on the other hand, we remain caught in the delusion that life should be easy, we will be less motivated to overcome a weak character, as we will falsely hope that if we just give it time life will get easier.

“Life is a battleground. It always has been, and always will be; and if it were not so, existence would come to an end.”

Carl Jung, Man and His Symbols

There is another piece of psychological insight that Jung saw as crucial for his patients to understand – namely, that our problems exist in the present and that present problems are not solved by digging into our past. Many people like to believe that only when they have determined why they are the way they are, can they move forward in life. But Jung believed that an excessive fixation on the past was merely an avoidance tactic used to evade the difficult task of facing up to what needs to be done now.

“People should know that not only the neurotic, but everyone, naturally prefers never to seek the causes of any inconvenience in himself, but to push them as far away from himself as possible in space and time. Otherwise he would run the risk of having to make a change for the better. Compared with this odious risk it seems infinitely more advantageous either to put the blame on to somebody else, or, if the fault lies undeniably with oneself, at least to assume that it somehow arose of its own accord in early infancy.” (V7)

Carl Jung, Two Essays on Analytical Psychology

With these doses of psychological insight, Jung would turn to the first actionable step in his method of treatment; and this was to help his patients face up to what he called the shadow, for as he writes:

“. . .the first requisite of any thorough psychological method, [is] for consciousness to confront its shadow.”

Carl Jung, Mysterium Coniunctionis

The shadow is Jung’s term for the elements of our character that we deny, and force into the unconscious, due to shame, insecurity, or censure. It is, in other words, the side of our personality we wish to hide from others, as well as from ourselves.

“...there can be no doubt that man is, on the whole, less good than he imagines himself or wants to be. Everyone carries a shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual’s conscious life, the blacker and denser it is.”

Carl Jung, Psychology and Religion

Jung believed that facing up to the shadow was crucial in the process of self-change for several reasons. Firstly, we do ourselves no favours by denying the inferior parts of our personality, we merely lose control of how, and when, these traits emerge. If, on the other hand we acknowledge a character flaw we can learn how to control its expression and so minimize the damage it does in our life, or as Jung explains:

“Anything conscious can be corrected, but anything that slips away into the unconscious is beyond the reach of correction and, its rank growth undisturbed, is subject to increasing degeneration. Happily, nature sees to it that the unconscious contents will irrupt into consciousness sooner or later and create the necessary confusion.”

Carl Jung, Mysterium Coniunctionis

But the shadow is not only made up of weakness, rather some elements of it are strengths which we repressed in our youth because our peers, family members, or society at large, gave us the false impression that these traits were bad. Some people, for example, repress the ability to express anger or the ability to stand up for themselves. Another benefit of becoming conscious of the shadow, therefore, is that we gain access to life-promoting character traits, or as Jung writes:

“...the shadow is merely somewhat inferior, primitive, unadapted, and awkward; not wholly bad. It even contains... qualities which would in a way vitalize and embellish human existence, but convention forbids!”

Carl Jung, Psychology and Religion

One way to become conscious of the shadow is to observe the weaknesses, flaws, and insecurities of those close to us. For not only do most of us repress similar character traits, but we also tend to project elements of our shadow onto other people. If, therefore, we pay attention to which character traits of our friends and family bother us, we may also gain a glimpse of our own shadow. In addition to observing others, another way to bring the shadow into the light of consciousness is to reflect on the motives for our actions, especially actions we are ashamed of, and to be open to self-criticism when it is warranted. For as Jung notes, often the only thing that is preventing us from seeing our shadow is the ability to be honest with ourselves: “*With a little self-criticism one can see through the shadow*” (*Carl Jung Aion*).

Along with becoming more conscious of the shadow, another integral aspect of Jung’s method of treatment was helping his patients find a meaning to their lives. For Jung believed that when stuck in a deep depression, or consumed by an anxiety disorder, to be cured necessitates discovering a “*role as one of the actors in the divine drama of life*” (*Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life*). To understand what was meant by this we can turn to an encounter Jung had with a chief of the Pueblo tribe in the first half of the 20th century. Jung was discussing with this man the traditions of his tribe when the chief made the following remark:

“Yes, we are a small tribe, and these Americans, they want to interfere with our religion. They should not do it, because we are the sons of the Father, the Sun. He who goes there”; (pointing to the sun) – “that is our Father. We must help him daily to rise over the horizon and to walk over Heaven. And we don’t do it for ourselves only: we do it for America, we do it for the whole world.” (V18)

Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life

Jung understood that to many in the modern day this statement would sound crazy and archaic. But as he further notes the members of this tribe did not suffer like we suffer. They were not infected by neuroses, anxiety disorders, or depression. They did not fill themselves with pills each day, and they were not debilitated by addictions. Rather this tribe was composed of highly functioning individuals who saw themselves as fulfilling their duty as an actor in the divine drama of life, and their lives were rich in meaning and purpose. Or as Jung wrote:

“These people have no problems. They have their daily life, their symbolic life. They get up in the morning with a feeling of their great and divine responsibility: they are the sons of the Sun, the Father, and their daily duty is to help the Father over the horizon – not for themselves alone, but for the whole world. You should see these fellows: they have a natural fulfilled dignity.”

Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life

Jung contrasts this way of life, with a Western woman he met. This lady, as Jung notes, was a compulsive traveller, always running from one place to the next, always seeking, but never really finding what she was looking for.

“I was amazed when I looked into her eyes – the eyes of a hunted, a cornered animal – seeking, seeking, always in the hope of something. . . She is possessed . . . And why is she possessed? Because she does not live the life that makes sense. Hers is a life utterly, grotesquely banal. . . with no point in it at all. If she dies today, nothing has happened, nothing has vanished – because she was nothing!”

Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life

This compulsive seeking infects many in the Western world. Some run from one destination to another, some chase romantic partners, others are compulsive seekers of money, prestige, fame, or recognition on social media. But whatever the outward form it takes, the underlying motivation is the same – the seeker is trying to run away from the banality of their existence. They are seeking to fill the void of emptiness that comes from living a meaningless life. But as Jung explains this void cannot be filled with things, or even experiences, what fills this void is knowing that we are living in a way that makes a difference, or as he writes concerning the woman he met:

“But if she could say, “I am the daughter of the Moon. Every night I must help the Moon, my Mother, over the horizon” – ah, that is something else! Then she lives, then her life makes sense, and makes sense in all continuity, and for the whole of humanity. That gives peace, when people feel that they are living [as] actors in the divine drama. That gives the only meaning to human life; everything else is banal and you can dismiss it. A career, producing of children, are all maya compared with that one thing, that your life is meaningful.”

Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life

Jung was not suggesting that we all adopt the Puebloan mythology, rather his point is that many people suffer because their life makes no sense. And the task for those who want to be free of anxiety or depression is to discover this sense. We must, in other words, find a way to justify our existence, so that we, like the Puebloan, can believe that our life is meaningful. For some this can be accomplished through religion, for others by contributing in a substantial way to the promotion of

values such as justice, freedom, or community, while others will find it through the creative act. But for those of us in the modern West, where we lack a dominant mythology, it is up to us, and us alone, to discover how we can play a meaningful role in the divine drama of life. For the few who accomplish this task, a fulfilling life will define their future, for the many who don't, years or decades of pointless suffering and compulsive seeking will be their fate.

“I am only concerned with the fulfilment of that which is in every individual, . . That is the whole problem; that is the problem of the true Pueblo: that I do today everything that is necessary so that my father can rise over the horizon.”

Carl Jung, The Symbolic Life